

## **Bread From Heaven - 9/24/17**

**Scriptures: Exodus 16:2-7, 13-15**  
**Philippians 1:19-28**

There's an old saying: "*The best things in life are free.*" If you think about it for a moment, I think you'll agree that it's true. How many of the things you hold most dear came to you because you earned them: Your spouse? Your kids? Your health? Your very life itself? I don't think I had much to do with deserving any of these things in my life, and I doubt, when you think of it, that you did in yours either. They've come to us as gifts from God, pure and simple.

The Christian faith is based on a concept that first got its grounding in Judaism of there being a gracious God, and that out of all-encompassing love for us, God provides us with what we need, whether we deserve it or not. In Christianity, salvation is offered to us by God through the gift of Jesus Christ, not that we've merited such an expression of divine love, but that God has decided to offer it to us freely. God knows human beings intimately, with all our foibles and vulnerabilities, and graciously gives us a way to make it through the challenges facing us in life that otherwise might prove insurmountable obstacles to us if left on our own.

Of course this is easy to believe, if everything is working out well for us. It's a much harder proposition to ascribe to if things aren't going so well, if a hurricane has just wiped out your home and inundated your land, an earthquake has buried your loved ones, or if we're up against some kind of dead end in our lives.

Take the Apostle Paul, for example. He was writing his letter to the Philippian church from imprisonment in Rome. What lay ahead for him was far from rosy: the probability that he would be beheaded, a method of execution that over the past few years has been brought back into play by ISIS. Beheading has been around for a long time, and was the method of execution the Romans reserved for their own citizens, like Paul, when charged with capital offenses. Actually the Romans considered it more humane and honorable than crucifixion, the kind of execution they reserved for rabble-rousers, political rebels and common criminals, like Jesus of Nazareth.

But Paul seems to be able to see God's gracious beneficence even in his current circumstance. He equivocates on whether he prefers to get it over with or whether he wants to be spared in order to live longer. If indeed he is to live longer, then he believes there's a purpose to his life being handed back to him by God. For with Paul, the greatest gift he valued in his life was the opportunity to "*live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ*" as he puts it in Philippians 1:27. Continuing to live so he could be helpful to the faithful members of the churches he had founded, like the one at Philippi in Greece, was for him truly a gift, but not to be desired as much as the gift of his ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ, which he believed would transcend his own death. So Paul counts both potential outcomes, life or death, as positive blessings he's being offered at the moment.

Whether he lives or whether he dies, in his mind he's being blessed either way. It's up to God to decide his fate, and he'll be happy whichever way it works out.

I remember once visiting a man named Reggie whom I'd gotten to know through my work as a volunteer with a prison ministry program in Minneapolis. Reggie was a former drug addict, pimp and an ex-con, who'd "found the Lord" while serving his time in prison, and had then become a counselor with a program that helped other ex-offenders reintegrate their lives back into the community. Everything had been going great for Reggie, until he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lung cancer, and now he was in the hospital and fading fast. I remember leaning over him there in his hospital bed so I could hear what he was trying to say. "*I'm blessed, man, I'm blessed!*" he whispered. And I thought to myself after leaving his room, "*You call dying of cancer at age 45 blessed??*" But with him it was absolutely genuine. Much like Paul, he viewed the life he'd received back upon his release from prison as a gift given for a reason: to help others who'd been in the same kind of life he'd once been in himself. But now, when death seemed imminent, he viewed his own demise as a gift from God as well, because he knew he'd soon be with God, and all would be well. Reggie died a few days later, and I attended his funeral, which was packed with all kinds of people, many of whom I'd not really want to be around in any other circumstance. It was a marvelous celebration of the life and faith of this one man who'd done so much to leave a positive legacy in the lives of so many people others hadn't been able to help. Reggie knew who it was from whom all his blessings flowed, and he gave thanks always for the constant love of the God who'd never let him down.

Not so for the Hebrew people stranded in the wilderness of Sin with Moses in our passage this morning from Exodus. They're *not* happy campers. Unlike Paul, they seem to be in touch with everything that's wrong for them rather than everything that's right. Take the lack of food for example. It's no small matter in their minds that they're going to starve to death if this God of Moses' doesn't come across with something for them to eat, and soon! It would have been better, some of them begin to say, if they'd just stayed back in Egypt where even though they were slaves they had their "*fill of bread.*"

The story of the ancient Hebrews' exodus from slavery in Egypt is one of the oldest and most seminal accounts in our religious tradition of how God loves and redeems the "chosen" people. In a dramatic display of divine intervention in history that they didn't expect or deserve, God leads the Israelite slaves out of Egypt, miraculously parting the Red Sea in the process. So in setting the stage for today's story of the "*manna from heaven,*" we need to realize that it's now only six weeks later, as we're told just before the beginning of our Scripture reading. You'd think the people's memories of this miracle would still be fresh in their minds. But no, hunger has clouded their memories and dimmed their appreciation of the divine act of intervention that had literally saved their necks from the Egyptians. Now, it seems, the "*whole congregation*" of Israelites is complaining to Moses, and whining out there in the wilderness!

True, there's no visible means of sustenance, no food and no water, out there in this barren wasteland. But there's no way back, either. They'd be deluding themselves

to think that even if they could cross back through the Red Sea the Egyptians would take them back in and feed them. What kind of welcome do they think they'd actually receive from their pursuers, who'd just lost their finest horsemen and charioteers when they'd been drowned by the Israelites' God in the Red Sea?

*"The harsh servitude the people endured in Egypt,"* writes Biblical commentator Callie Plunket-Brewton, *"bears no resemblance to this description of the plenty (the former Israelite slaves) claim they enjoyed there. Interestingly, the people make no mention of pharaoh and his unreasonable demands. In an indirect way, the people seem to blame God both for their current crisis in the wilderness as well as (for) their enslavement: "'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt.'"* *Pharaoh was the one trying to kill them in Egypt. God rescued them! Their hunger leads them to what seems to be willful forgetfulness."*<sup>1</sup>

Yet nowhere in the story for today does it say that God holds their lack of gratitude against them. We read instead that God speaks to Moses, telling him that he will rain *"bread from heaven"* each day that they find themselves without food. God knows what they need, and God has a plan. It's just not apparent to the people in the wilderness yet. *"At twilight you shall eat meat,"* God says in verse 12 of Exodus 16, *"and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God."* Rather than being *perturbed* with them, God is *patient* and understanding. He knows that they're famished and cranky, and that it's predictable that most people will prefer *a known* problem to an *unknown* solution.

We've seen this phenomenon at work throughout history, and even in some of the events in our own lifetime. When communism collapsed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union twenty-five years ago, there were the first initial years of euphoria, when the people celebrated their newly gained freedoms. Democracy was all the rage, and laissez-faire capitalism replaced the command economies of the former communist system. But then things didn't work out so well. The streets of these newly constituted democracies didn't turn out immediately to be paved with gold, and those who couldn't adapt quickly or agilely to the heady entrepreneurial approach now called for found themselves left behind and financially worse off than before. The older people especially missed the social security of the old socialist systems, and they voted for former communist candidates who promised a re-establishment of national pride and social certainty. Over the past several years we've seen Vladimir Putin emerge as a popular strongman in Russia, and the country now seems bent on reasserting itself on the world stage as it seeks to reestablish its control over neighboring republics, like Georgia, Belarus, and the Ukraine, which had struggled so hard to escape the Soviet Union's grasp just twenty-five years ago.

Human nature seems so forgetful and fickle at times. Egyptian slavery or Soviet domination... all are forgotten or forgiven by their former subjects if it's a matter of getting their current needs met. *"Sure it was a horrible life back in Egypt"* (we could substitute Soviet Union here). *"But at least it was familiar. At least it was predictable."*

*At least we got fed stale bread once a day as slaves. This situation we're now in is the pits! And you, Moses, are responsible for getting us into it!"*

Can you imagine how Moses must have felt out there in the wilderness? *"Geez! After all I've done for you, this is the thanks I get? Forget it! Who needs it! Go and find your own way out of here. Go on... swim back across the Red Sea, for all I care, if you think Egypt was so much better! Then see what kind of reception you get there. And don't forget to write!"*

Yet rather than responding angrily as we might expect, or sarcastically like Moses, God surprises us. Knowing full well that vulnerable people can't make it through a wilderness without some sustenance, God showers bread from heaven, in the form of a flock of quail and a dewy substance the people call *"manna."*

In Hebrew, *"manna"* literally means *"What is it?"* Apparently, quail and other small birds follow their annual migratory route northeast from the Horn of Africa across the Red Sea to the Sinai Peninsula. When they reach the shores of this wilderness they just plunk down on the ground to rest and recover from their exhausting flight. Thus they were easy prey for the starving Israelites, who just happened to be camping on those very shores. Our Exodus account says the quail covered the ground, there were so many of them. *"And the next morning there was a layer of dew around the camp"* it goes on. Maybe we should read the Hebrew word for *"dew"* more like *"doo-doo"* in English, who knows? There's been a lot of speculation on the nature of manna over the centuries since. One theory says that it may indeed have been quail guano. Another one posits that it was the residue from lice that eat holes in the fruit of the tamarisk, a species of scrubby tree native to the Sinai region and northern Arabia. When the sappy residue left by the insects congeals in the cool night air it forms pellets, which the nomadic people of the area have collected over the centuries and have made into little cakes that can be cooked. The goo needs to be collected in the morning before it evaporates in the warmer daytime air.

Not a particularly appetizing form of food, to be sure, this manna. But hey, if you're starving it works! Whatever it was, or is, this flaky substance offered a form of sustenance that was enough for the ancient Hebrews to survive on for what turned out to be a very long time of wandering in the wilderness, *forty years* we're told. If we read further on in the text of the Old Testament we'd find that when they finally do reach the Promised Land of Canaan, the manna stops appearing each morning. It lasts just long enough, and gives them just enough nourishment to make it through their wilderness sojourn, and no more.

So what are we to take away from this story? A lesson, perhaps, that God provides all we really need, if we don't hoard it or squander it. We need just to appreciate the gifts of God that are freely given to one and all, regardless of our own worthiness or lack thereof. Our very life itself is indeed a gift, to be used for the common good and not just for our own personal benefit. We're called to follow the God who loves us completely, who stays with us throughout life, through the wilderness sojourns

we're bound to encounter along the way, and even through death, until we reach the Promised Land.

Those talents you have, which you employ in your work and in your daily life, came to you as gifts. You didn't earn them. They're just a given about who you are. That most special person to you is in your life, not because you made them appear there, but because they came as a gift from God to you. Treat them well, and with appreciation. This planet we live on, with all its food and resources, with all its majesty and mystery and beauty is a gift to all of us creatures who call it home, a gift to be used wisely and not to be squandered, just like the bread from heaven was there to be used but not hoarded, a gift sufficient to sustain life for as far as we can see, if we share it fairly and use it wisely. So let's be good stewards of the gift!

For the Christian, Jesus Christ is our greatest gift, who comes to us like manna from heaven. There's nothing we've done to deserve the gift of his life, and there's nothing we could ever do to earn the gift of eternal life offered to us through his death and resurrection. God knows we're all fallible and mortal, and knows that without Christ, we'd never be able to make it on our own. Christ is for us the greatest manifestation of God's gracious love, pure and simple.

So, thanks be to God for our bread from heaven! Amen.

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1. Callie Plunket-Brewton in her commentary of Exodus 16:2-15 on The Text This Week, Sept. 21, 2014, [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com)